



*Catherine E. Pugh*  
Mayor

## COMMISSION FOR HISTORICAL & ARCHITECTURAL PRESERVATION

*Tom Liebel, Chairman*

### STAFF REPORT



*Thomas J. Stosur*  
Director

**August 14, 2018**

**REQUEST:** Construct Five-story Building

**ADDRESS:** 509 South Washington Street (Fells Point Historic District)

**RECOMMENDATION: Approval with Conditions:**

- setback the fourth and fifth floors so they can't be seen from Washington Street

**STAFF:** Walter Edward Leon

**PETITIONER:** Justin Seto

#### **SITE/HISTORIC DISTRICT**

The site is located on the eastern edge of the Fells Point Historic District. Fells Point is significant as one of the original three settlements that merged to form the beginnings of Baltimore City. The area is directly linked to early maritime trade, which was to Baltimore's growth and development. Besides the significance of Fells Point in the eighteenth century, the community has been a constantly growing and changing urban place. Many of the earliest houses were added on to in the Victorian era creating a unique blend of pre-Revolutionary War and post-Civil War architectural styles and characteristics. Fells Point has been a diverse neighborhood of many ethnic groups each influencing the growth and development of the area throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of the later structures are of architectural significance and are consistent with the waterfront character of Fells Point, even if stylistically different. Recreation Pier is an example of this type of significant structure in Fells Point.

Site Conditions/Architectural Description: There were no structures located on the site when the district was designated in late 2007. Historic maps indicate that a pair of rowhouses existed in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The site also includes a condemned former roadbed where a commercial garage once stood. The site is land locked to the north, south and east by other structures or rear yards. The 500 block of South Washington Street is composed of a variety of 19<sup>th</sup> century rowhouses that range in height, width and massing. All are typical mid to late Victorian variations of the Baltimore rowhouse. The site is near the intersection of Eastern Avenue, one of the prime commercial corridors in the neighborhood. There is no public right of way on the property. Today, the property is used as a parking lot.

The 500 block of South Washington Street comprises two, two-and-a-half, and three-story rowhouses that are two and three bays wide. The rooflines vary from slanted flat roofs with decorative and simple cornices to shallow gables roofs, and steep gabled roofs with dormer windows. The height of these rowhouses range from 30 feet to approximately 38 feet high. The width of the rowhouses range from approximately 14 to 20 feet wide.

The eastern boundary of the lot faces a very different context; it abuts a surface parking lot that is adjacent to South Castle Street. On the east side of Castle Street, are one story commercial suburban-

style structures (a Royal Farms, Rita's, and a Burger King) surrounded by surface parking. Directly south of the proposed apartment building are new townhomes approximately 35 feet high.

## **BACKGROUND**

On February 13, 2018, the applicant presented a five-story building with a seven-foot fifth floor setback to the Commission, which made the following motion:

That the applicant return to the full commission with a revised proposal that addresses the following requirements:

1. Reduce overall mass to better conform to the surrounding structures;
2. Present at a Site Plan Review Committee meeting prior to returning to CHAP;
- and
3. Setback top floor or floors further from front façade.

The following amendments were included: provide site line study from Washington Street [5'-6" height from sidewalk across the street], Eastern Avenue, and Castle Street. Applicant [must] also provide elevations that articulate fenestration, cornice, etc.

The Commission reviewed revised drawings at the July 10, 2018, hearing and tabled the item, directing the applicant to further study the massing, setback, and rear elevation. At this hearing, after testimony from community residents, the commission discussed the need for more community outreach.

The Commission has not given any approvals for this project.

## **PROPOSAL**

The applicant proposes to construct a new five-story residential building with ground floor parking. This proposal has both a fourth and fifth floor setback, both of which will still be seen from Washington Street. The proposal is for apartment units built along a central corridor on each floor and a terrace roof deck above the fifth floor.

## **APPLICATION OF GUIDELINES**

The staff applied relevant portions of *Chapter 2: Design Guidelines for Additions, New Construction, and Non-Contributing Buildings*. Guideline 2.1 directs applicants to identify the character defining features of the surrounding historic buildings and streetscape. Design new buildings to visually relate to the historic environment. Respect the established design precedent in the immediate area. It also states that contemporary architectural design that reflects its current time, place, use, and culture is accepted, provided the design is compatible with the character of the historic district.

Guidelines 2.2 Site Design, directs applicants to retain established property line patterns, street and alley widths, setbacks, primary and secondary building orientation, and landscape elements, incorporate character-defining site design features of the historic district into the designs of new construction projects, and design new construction to follow the existing pattern of building widths and spacing between buildings. It also states that primary buildings should have a similar orientation and relationship to the street as the existing buildings. Primary entrances and facades should be located, oriented, and sequenced to be consistent with the pattern of entrances and facades in the neighborhood. Also, new construction projects should reinforce existing patterns of open space and enclosure created by existing vehicular and pedestrian circulation routes, fences, walls, yards, courtyards, gardens, and landscaping.

Finally, the guidelines states that new construction at corners or abutting public spaces require special consideration in the design of entrances and multiple, publicly visible facades.

Guideline 2.3 Scale and Form states that new buildings must be compatible with the height and depth of surrounding buildings. Where there is variation of building height within the immediate neighborhood, the new building should generally relate to the predominant pattern.

The guideline also directs that new buildings must complement the massing of surrounding buildings, including the proportion of solid surfaces (walls) to voids (window and door openings.) Respect the characteristic rhythm (fenestration, bays, rooflines, etc.) of existing buildings. It also states that applicants should design the new building to be proportional to surrounding buildings. Consider important building proportions such as floor-to-floor heights, the size and placement of windows and doors, the scale of articulated elements such as porches, overhanging cornices, and bay windows.

Design rooflines to be compatible with those found on surrounding buildings.

### **NEIGHBORHOOD COMMENTS**

The community is overwhelmingly opposed to this project in its current form. We have received more than 60 emails, letters, and phone calls in opposition and only one email in support. The opposition is concerned that the apartment building is too big and does not fit into the fabric of the neighborhood. In addition, they are concerned about other aspects of the project such as parking that is not within the purview of this Commission. At least five neighborhood organizations have written letters in opposition to the project: Upper Fells Point Improvement Association, Fells Point Community Organization, Fells Point Task Force, The Architectural Review Committee, Fells Prospect Community Association, Fells Point Resident Association, and the Society to Preserve Fells Point and Federal Hill. Additionally, City Councilman Cohen, State Delegate Lierman, and Senator Ferguson have sent CHAP letters of opposition to this project. All the letters and emails of opposition have been placed in the record.

### **ANALYSIS**

The Staff has reviewed the revised proposal in context with the Commission's July 10 direction to the applicant and the guidelines for new construction. The following observations helped guide staff:

1. 500 block of S. Washington Street is a two to three-story rowhouse streetscape, creating an intimate pedestrian scale.
2. Castle Street is the eastern boundary of the Fell's Point Historic district; nevertheless, the east and south elevations of the proposed building will be easily seen.
3. Aliceanna Street to the south is a busy street with a variety of structures and open lots.
3. Fell's Point development pattern comprises small to medium rowhouses AND mid-size buildings (40-60 feet tall).
4. This lot is 60 feet wide by 140 to 160 feet deep.

Staff believes that the Washington Street façade must fit into the scale of the two to three story rowhouse streetscape; therefore, the fourth and fifth floors should not be seen from Washington Street. From Eastern Avenue, the project will be minimally seen. Staff recommends that the elevator shaft and other rooftop accessories be moved to the southern end of the building. Staff is less concerned about the buildings being seen from Aliceanna or Castle streets because of the change in character of the neighborhood.

Staff is also concerned about the amount of opposition to this project. Staff believes it is in the best interest of the developer to work closely with the communities to directly address all their concerns in a meaningful way. Staff also believes that this project should come back to the full commission for final design review.

The proposal needs further city approvals. If the project must be redesigned to meet other approvals, the applicant must come back to CHAP for review and approval.

**RECOMMENDATION:** CHAP staff recommends Approval with conditions:

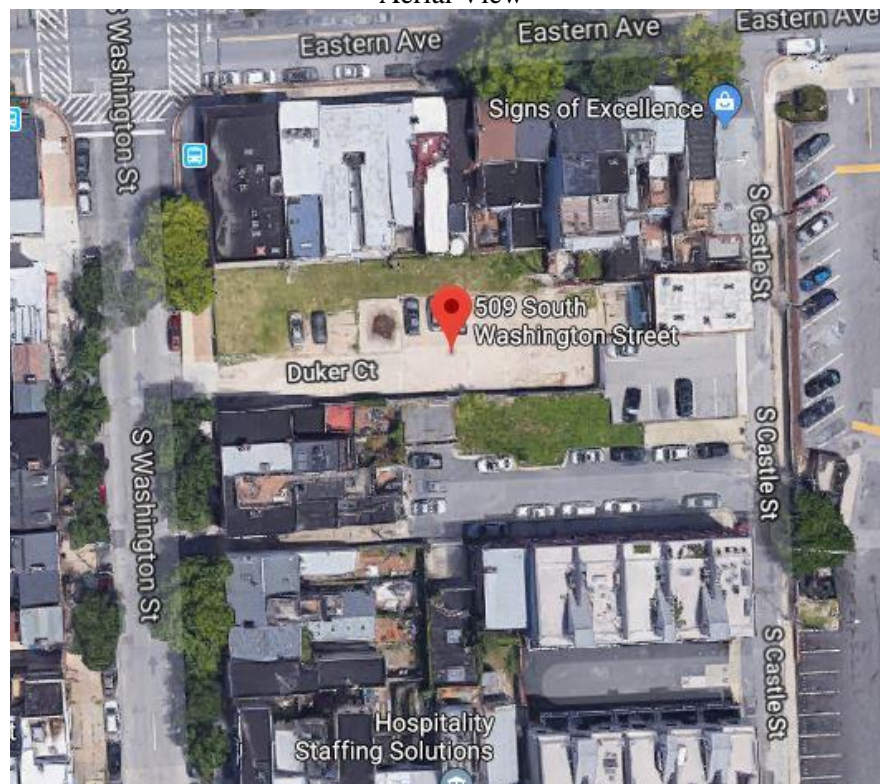
- Applicant meets all other City and Building Code requirements.
- Set back fourth and fifth floors, so they cannot be seen from Washington Street
- Setback elevator and stair towers from north elevation.
- Return to the full commission for final review after engagement with the community.

Eric L. Holcomb  
Executive Director

Site Map - Historic District



Aerial View



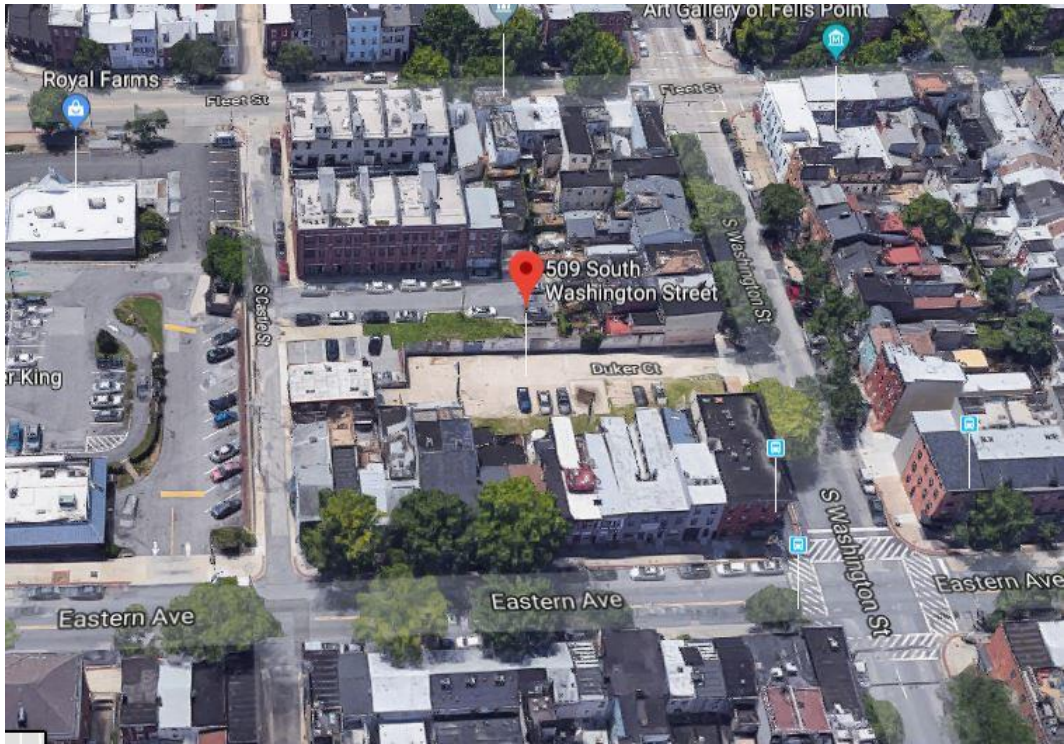
View from South



View from East



View from North



View from the West

